Book Club Kit

BERKLEY

Dear Readers,

The Roommate covers a lot of subject matter that many of us have experienced but that we don't normally talk about—unrequited love, less than satisfying sex, disappointing our families, and of course, pornography—so I like to think of the book as opening the door to some hilariously awkward bonding moments. For example, I recently had the pleasure of explaining the premise to my dentist who I'm proud to say stopped mid-cleaning to preorder.

I'll confess, I wrote *The Roommate* believing the premise—two accidental roommates launching a sexy start-up with the power to overthrow a porn empire—was too outlandish for it to ever be published. In fact, I took a writing course where the instructor, a well-established author, flat-out told me that a love interest who performed in adult films would be an impossible sell. Needless to say, spite is a powerful motivator, but alas they say the best revenge is living well (I also may or may not have plans to send her a signed copy of the book in the mail upon release).

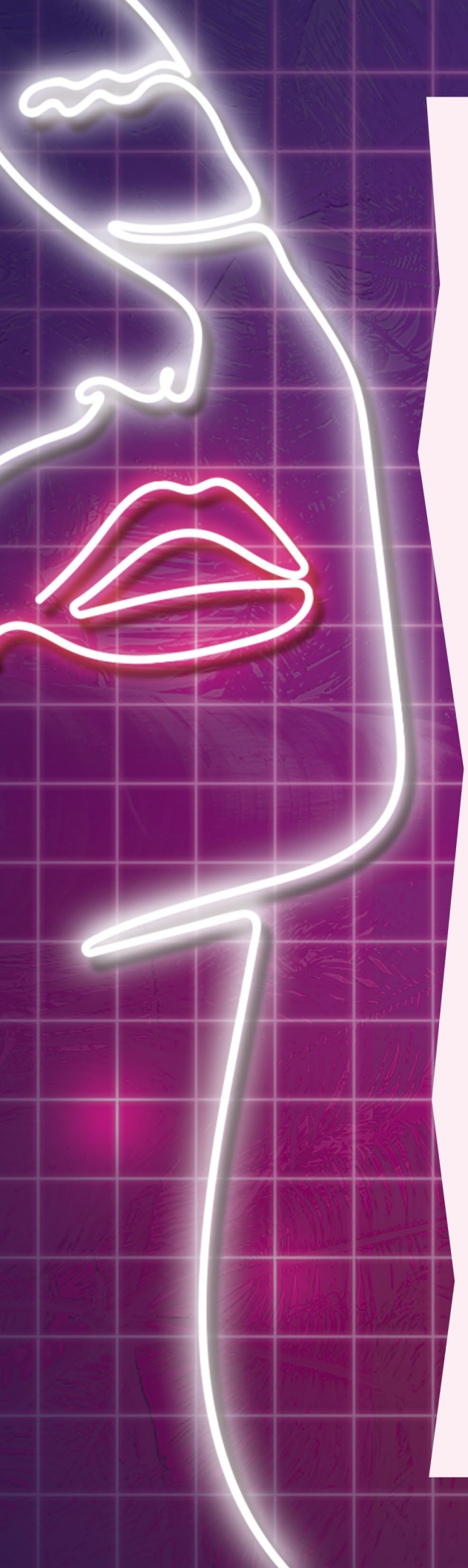
In any case, like my main character, Clara, perceived anonymity made me bold. The idea that no one would ever read this story gave me the freedom to write unapologetically about taboo subjects like pleasure and shame. Common advice for new authors is "write what you want to read." I certainly did that—why do you think there are so many pages dedicated to horny pining—but in a lot of ways I also wrote what I *needed* to read: a feminist manifesto about claiming the life and love you want, instead of settling for someone else's idea of who you're supposed to be. Now my biggest problem is figuring out how to convince my parents not to read the sex scenes. . . .

In all seriousness, I'm a firm believer in the importance and power of conversation in building healthy relationships. One of the most gratifying experiences of my career was when a friend confessed that reading *The Roommate* had inspired her to talk to her husband about their sex life for the first time in their ten-year relationship. Ten years!! But I get it. Society tells us not to talk about sex, even with the people we're having it with, but I hope that you'll decide, like I did with my writing instructor, that someone telling you can't do something is a great invitation to pursue it in earnest.

Thank you so much for considering my debut *The Roommate* for your book club. I myself have belonged to several book clubs and always found that they provided stimulating conversation and, more often than not, delicious cheese—two of my favorite things. Personally, I think *The Roommate* would pair well with a baked Brie drizzled with honey and/or chili oil, in case you're looking for suggestions.

Happy reading (and snacking),

Rosie Danan



A Conversation with Rosie Danan

Tell us about *The Roommate*! What inspired you to write this story?

The Roommate is my unapologetic ode to sex positivity and sex education.

I have always loved that romance as a genre is one of the only media forms that routinely explores the concept of pleasure outside of the dominant depiction we see across media—the cisgender, heterosexual male gaze. Now, *that* pleasure isn't exclusive to sex, though certainly it can contribute. Romance novels, with their commitment to providing happy endings for all kinds of people, have brought me comfort, joy, and excitement in both good times and bad.

Unfortunately, after finishing another great romance novel full of empowering relationship dynamics, I would have thoroughly depressing conversations with friends about the sorry state of intimacy in the real world. When I read a study that gave these collective experiences a name, The Orgasm Gap, I realized the lack of pleasure parity—both in art and experience, especially in heterosexual relationships—wasn't just a problem amongst people I knew. Modern dating culture had introduced a new double-standard in relationships where "doubts about women's entitlement to pleasure in casual liaisons keep women from asking to have their desires satisfied, and keep men from seeing women as deserving of their attentiveness in hookups."

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As you can imagine, I found this phenomenon more than a little upsetting. So I decided to write a book about shedding societal stigma and owning the quest for mutually satisfying intimacy—a book that acknowledges the role of both communication and education in healthy relationship dynamics.

Clara's experience reflect that of many millennial woman. She's had lack-luster suitors and kind of figures that's as good as it gets. Then life throws her together with a pleasure professional who's committed both privately and professionally, to combatting sexual

double standards. Josh helps Clara see that her partners have failed her, not the other way around, and then together they formulate a plan to promote equal opportunity orgasms at scale.

Unfortunately, the success of that project hinges on them keeping their hands off each other and well . . . that becomes more challenging than they originally anticipated.

What do you feel are the main themes/issues that are addressed in *The Roommate*?

The first theme in the novel is about defying expectations.

So many of us internalize other people's ideas about the way we should look, think, and behave, and then work to fulfill those molds, even when they make us unhappy.

Both of my main characters rebel against society's standards. Clara comes from a wealthy, infamous family where she's expected to uphold the ideal of a blue-blooded socialite and preserve what's left of the "good family name." Josh is an adult performer who society defines exclusively by his profession.

Over the course of the novel, Clara defies her family's expectations, Josh defies his own expectations, and together they defy society's expectations.

The second theme you'll find throughout *The Roommate* is fighting the patriarchy.

I've set out to do this in ways big and small throughout the book in the portrayal of healthy and empowered sex workers; female entrepreneurs; a site that prioritizes women's pleasure; a Black female district attorney running on a platform of employment reform in California; and, of course, in the rebellion and eventual lawsuit led by sex workers against a porn empire. I hope this book helps readers unpack their own internalized misogyny and especially the stigma against sex work.

I probably got too much enjoyment out of telling my boyfriend, "Um, just a heads up that there's a porn star in my DMs right now, but I swear it's for my book."

Did the book require any special research? If so, please provide any interesting details about your research. ;)

I did a lot of secondary research utilizing books, documentaries, and essays by and about porn performers and the porn industry (some of which I've listed in the next question below). I also had a subject-matter expert, performer Lane Rogers, review the book to ensure my portrayal of adult performers was both sensitive and accurate.

Lane was incredibly generous with his time and expertise. He is also extremely hot, and I probably got too much enjoyment out of telling my boyfriend, "Um, just a heads up that there's a porn star in my DMs right now, but I swear it's for my book."

Do you have any websites or resources that you'd like to share for anyone reading this novel?

If you're looking for something in the vein of the website, Shameless, created in the novel, check out OMGYES.com. It's a practical resource for women's pleasure developed by researchers, filmmakers, engineers, designers, educators, and sexologists—though no adult film stars (or roommates) are involved as far as I know!

In addition, there are so many valuable resources dedicated to promoting healthy intimacy across media formats. I've listed some of my favorites below. Please know that this just taps the surface, but digging into these is a great place to start.

Other Websites:

- Scarleteen: progressive, inclusive, and independent sex and relationship education, advocacy, and support for young people.
- Afrosexology: an education website and newsletter for Black people to openly discuss sexual exploration and liberation.

Experts:

- Yana Tallon-Hicks, MA, is a couples and relationship therapist and a consent, sex, and sexuality writer and educator. Her work centers around the belief that pleasure-positive and consent-based sex education can positively impact our lives and the world.
- Ericka Hart, M.Ed, (She/They) is a Black queer femme activist, writer, and highly acclaimed speaker and award-winning sexuality educator. Hart is currently an adjunct faculty member at Columbia University's School of Social Work.
- Stoya is a writer, performer, and pornographer. She's been working in the field of sexuality for over ten years. Among her work, she runs a Sex Lit book club that meets in person in Brooklyn and online.
- Tracie Q. Gilbert, PhD, @thembianaiya, uses conversation to help achieve sexual wellness and healing for Black people.

Books:

- *Come as You Are* by Emily Nagoski
- *A Curious History of Sex* by Kate Lister
- *The Feminist Porn Book: The Politics of Producing Pleasure* by Tristan Taormino
- *Inferior: How Science Got Women Wrong—and the New Research That's Rewriting the Story* by Angela Saini
- *Bonk: How Science Got Women Wrong—and the New Research That's Rewriting the Story* by Mary Roach
- *Vagina: A New Biography* by Naomi Wolf
- *Sex at Dawn: How We Mate, Why We Stray, and What It Means for Modern Relationships* by Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá
- *Mind the Gap: the truth about desire and how to foolproof your sex life* by Dr. Karen Gurney

Podcasts:

- *Doing It! With Hannah Witton* talks about all things sex, relationships, dating, and bodies
- *Sluts and Scholars* Nicoletta Heidegger is a licensed marriage and family therapist and sexologist. She chats with folks across sexuality, kink, and professional spectrums about desire, pleasure, shame, stigma, and bodily functions. "Help to make your sex smarter and your smarts sexier."

Apps:

- Tabú Stanford graduates Mia Davis and Elise Racine created an app that spotlights everything you need to know about sex. There's a forum for questions as well as facts about reproductive health.

How did your writing process change, if at all, while writing this novel?

Since *The Roommate* is my debut novel, and also the first book I've ever written, it was less about changing my writing process and more about developing one. Even though writing can be a very solo activity, this book really came to life when I found a community of other writers through the organization Pitch Wars. The nonprofit program matches newer writers with experienced mentors who help them get their manuscripts ready for agent querying. I was selected as a 2018 mentee with *The Roommate* (then titled *Never Have I Ever*). I worked with a mentor pair, Heather Van Fleet and Lana Sloan, to refine my manuscript over the course of several months in a process that paralleled the traditional publishing editorial model. That structure and support showed me how to go from an early draft to a polished story, and I absolutely applied lessons and techniques from that time to my ongoing writing approach.

I'm extremely grateful for that experience facilitated by the organization. The process took my book to a level that enabled my publishing dreams, as well as giving me a wonderful peer network. It was my honor to serve as a Pitch Wars mentor in 2019, and I hope to continue to give back to the organization in that capacity and more in the years to come.

Basically, I casually hope it wrecks your life and then tenderly puts you back together—but in like a fun way. ;)

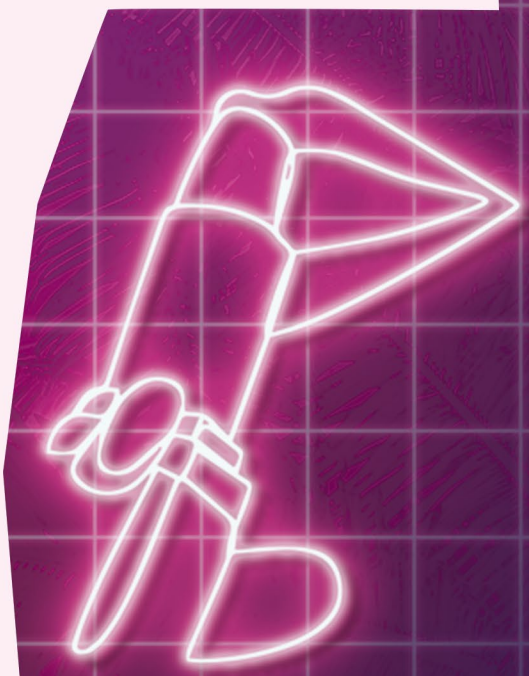
What do you hope readers will take away from this story?

I hope the experience of reading this book brings you (like the characters in the book) all the glorious, big emotions of falling in love with the last person you expected. The nervous laughter and sweaty palms brought on by encountering an extremely hot stranger. The dizzy rush of adrenaline that comes from staring your fears dead in the eye. The hot obsession of craving someone you know you shouldn't. And even the gut-wrenching sense of loss that descends as you watch the one you love walk away and wonder if it's forever. Basically, I casually hope it wrecks your life and then tenderly puts you back together—but in like a fun way. ;)

Bonus:

Action movies featured in *The Roommate* that Rosie argues are actually also great romances:

- *Speed*
- *Rocky*
- *The Mummy*
- *Die Hard*



Playlists

JOSH CURATED

Josh describes it as:

Sentimental, "boogielicious," shameless

Good for:

Singing in the shower, road trips, backyard BBQ, practicing your falsetto, serenading your sweetheart (to their extreme mortification)

Pair with:

Cherry Coke float and fish tacos

"Heart of Glass" – Blondie
"Hey Leonardo (She Likes Me for Me)" – Blessid Union of Souls
"Tightrope (feat. Big Boi)" - Janelle Monáe
"Overnight Celebrity" - Twista
"Never Let You Go" - Third Eye Blind
"Pinch Me" - Barenaked Ladies
"F.N.T." - Semisonic
"Bad Girls" - Donna Summer
"My Body" - Young the Giant
"Move Your Feet" - Junior Senior
"Lovefool" - The Cardigans
"Babylon" - David Gray
"Send Me On My Way" - Rusted Root
"Shoop" - Salt-N-Pepa
"Don't Take the Money" - Bleachers
"Unbelievers" - Vampire Weekend
"All Night" - Chance the Rapper
"Ants Marching" - Dave Matthews Band
"Short Skirt / Long Jacket" - Cake

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/2rj9OTNEUEW8MzY9F6CHhi?si=Ljqnt4ZoQomUKDuVexq-yg

CLARA CURATED

Clara describes it as:

"Big feelings about love"

Good for:

Applying makeup, dancing it out, journaling, cooking

Pair with:

Red wine and dark chocolate

"All I Can Do" – Dolly Parton
"Can't Take My Eyes Off of You" – Ms. Lauryn Hill
"Wouldn't It Be Nice" – The Beach Boys
"Nobody's Fool" – Miranda Lambert
"A Case of You" – Joni Mitchell
"Heartbreaker (feat. Jay-Z)" – Mariah Carey
"Baby, I Don't Cry Over You" – Billie Holiday
"Call It Off" - Tegan and Sara
"Don't Want You" – Lunachicks
"Best Thing I Never Had" – Beyoncé
"No Scrubs" – TLC
"Just Fine" – Mary J. Blige
"Primadona" – Marina and the Diamonds
"Like Real People Do" – Hozier
"My Mistake" – Cam
"Head Underwater" – Jenny Lewis
"My Silver Lining" – First Aid Kit
"Cut To The Feeling" – Carly Rae Jepsin

https://open.spotify.com/playlist/4uHvkpAZ9J5rWBOqSKEX5j?si=OdtXNoj-Qd26M6R1-ZFSHg

Discussion Questions:

1. At the beginning of the book, both Clara and Josh have built their life around other people's expectations (in Josh's case, the lack of the them). Which of their internalized societal roles was hardest to unlearn?
2. *The Roommate* flips several genre tropes on their head—the boy next door, Everett, becomes a lazy antagonist instead of the love interest, and Naomi, the "jealous ex-girlfriend," becomes a partner and confidant. How would this story have been different if either one of those tropes hadn't been subverted?
3. Clara tells Josh that her past partners have let her down in the bedroom, and that "it just seemed more efficient" to handle the situation herself. Why do you think she felt that way?
4. Early in the book, Clara believes certain negative stigma about porn and adult performers that she works through by examining her own bias and getting to know Josh, Naomi, and other industry professionals. Did you find yourself examining any of your own ideas about porn or adult performers as you read the novel? How can we break down the stigma against sex work and make the world safer for and more accepting of sex workers?
5. While going into business together brings Josh and Clara closer, it also presents a barrier to them entering into a romantic relationship. Do you think starting Shameless ultimately helped or hindered their love story?
6. Clara and her aunt Jill have several parallels—they both followed their hearts to social notoriety and escaped to LA with next to no plan. But while Jill cuts all ties with the Wheaton family after receiving their censure, Clara refuses to let them push her away. Why doesn't Clara also abandon the Wheatons in the wake of her own scandal?
7. Do you think Josh and Clara would have gotten together if his contract dispute hadn't led him to stop performing while they were roommates?
8. After moving across the country in pursuit of unrequited love, Clara asks Josh, "Haven't you ever done something stupid to impress someone you liked?" Well, have you? And perhaps more importantly, was it worth it?
9. Josh and Clara go from being roommates to being engaged in the epilogue. What do you think changed when they started living together as romantic partners?

Rosie Danan

About Rosie Danan:

Rosie Danan writes steamy, bighearted books about the trials and triumphs of modern love. When not writing, she enjoys jogging slowly to fast music, petting other people's dogs, and competing against herself in rounds of *Chopped* using the miscellaneous ingredients occupying her fridge. As an American expat living in London, Rosie regularly finds herself borrowing slang that doesn't belong to her.

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